

Why Not Rectify Past Injustices?

I just got back from a month in the UK, working for the John Locke Institute's two summer schools. The morning before I left, I delivered my talk on "The Economics of Antipathy and Stereotyping." In the subsequent Q&A, one of the students asked (roughly), "But shouldn't we try to rectify past injustices that *caused* present-day differences in worker productivity?" Since I wasn't satisfied with my answer at the time, here are the three key points I wish I'd made. Hopefully my John Locke students can read this before the summer school ends tomorrow.

1. *Against collective guilt.* Consider the following thought experiment. Group B holds Group A in bondage for centuries. Then Group B finally emancipates Group A. Group A leaves the area, and a plague wipes out all of the members of Group B. Eventually, Group A encounters a totally new people, Group C. The members of Group A then say, "For centuries, the members of Group Non-A oppressed members of Group A. As a result, members of Group Non-A have a moral obligation to rectify the past injustices that continue to impede our economic success. You are therefore morally obliged to both (a) give us preferential treatment in the labor market to ensure equal outcomes, and (b) create social programs to help us until A's attain equal outcomes without preferential treatment."

The obvious objection, of course, is that the injustices were committed by Group B, not Group C. As a result, Group C has no moral obligation to rectify anything. Indeed, Group A is unjust to lump them in with Group B.

Extending the thought experiment, imagine that many members of Group B escape the plague, then integrate so thoroughly into Group C that there is no practical way to distinguish the B's from C's. Would that change anything? Not much. The obvious objection then becomes, "*Many* members of Group C are entirely innocent, yet you are demanding 'rectification' from innocent and guilty alike."

What is the connection between these thought experiments and the student's original question? To take the most egregious case, American blacks were once enslaved. Perhaps this explains much of their continuing performance gap. Unfortunately, to rectify this past injustice, we have to punish all non-blacks. None now alive ever owned slaves. Many are not even descended from former slave owners. Even if they were, simply being a child of a slave-owner is not an injustice" So the demand for rectification is tantamount to Group A making demands on Group C for the injustices of Group B. And once again, not only is Group C not morally obliged to comply; Group A is morally wrong to make such demands.

2. *Against moral distraction.* Popular demands for the rectification of past injustices are a

grave distraction in a world where extreme injustices are *ongoing*. And as I told my students repeatedly, there is an ongoing extreme injustice in even the most morally self-satisfied countries: The denial of people's right to live and work where they please on account of their nation of birth. "Social justice" advocates who have time to worry about affirmative action in a world with draconian immigration restrictions really are straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. Just think how much freer immigration would be today if all the First World's "anti-racist" and "anti-sexist" moral energy had been redirected towards the protection of every human's right to live and work where he likes.

3. *What about private organizations?* If I recall correctly, the student specifically asked about Harvard admissions. My view: As a private organization, Harvard has the right to spend its own resources on behalf of mistaken moral theories. Still, Harvard *ought* to (a) refrain from making false accusations of collective guilt, and (b) focus their resources on the most severe injustices, instead of the most fashionable. Furthermore, it is reasonable to deny government subsidies to organizations like Harvard that habitually spend taxpayer money for unjust causes.

Followup question: Is it really true that modern "anti-racists" and "anti-sexists" believe in collective guilt? For the most part, *yes*. At minimum, they're engaged in a provocative equivocation, and hence have only themselves to blame if they're misunderstood.